

Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen, April 11, 2008

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DoD News Briefing with Secretary Gates and Adm. Mullen from the Pentagon

SEC. GATES: Good morning.

As you know, yesterday, Admiral Mullen and I testified for the Senate on the way ahead in Iraq. It is a path that is unanimously endorsed by our nation's top uniformed officers and civilian leaders, myself included.

We are currently in the middle of the initial drawdown of the five surge brigades. By the time it's complete in July, we will have rearranged our forces in Iraq, redrawn battle lines, reduced our presence in some areas and shifted more responsibility to the Iraqis. In short, there will have been a major force realignment.

The only prudent course of action at the end of July is to pause the drawdown for a period of time -- General Petraeus has said 45 days -- to assess what impact, if any, all of this will have had. General Petraeus will then be in a position to give an initial recommendation. Whether we should hold troop levels steady, to maintain stability or offer additional protection for provincial elections or whether, because conditions allow for it, he can recommend further drawdowns at that time.

As the president said yesterday, continue return on success. Regardless of General Petraeus' initial assessment and recommendation, the process of evaluation will be a continuing one, with periodic recommendations whether to stand fast or make further drawdowns.

I certainly hope, continue to hope, that conditions will allow us to remove more troops by year's end. That hope for return on success is shared by the president, General Petraeus, Admiral Mullen and the Chiefs. But we're all realistic.

The history of this conflict has demonstrated that we must always be prepared for the unpredictable and that we must be extremely cautious with our every step. As I said yesterday, we cannot get the endgame wrong.

Admiral.

ADM. MULLEN: Sir, I don't have any opening.

Q Mr. Secretary, there's still fighting, as you know, in Sadr City and some in Basra as well. I wonder if both of you can address this. Is Muqtada al-Sadr an enemy of the United States?

ADM. MULLEN: To me, Muqtada al-Sadr is somewhat of an enigma, and it's pretty difficult to figure out exactly across all of the things that he is involved in where he's headed or what his plans are. Certainly he has -- the cease-fire that he asked for many months ago, some 12 to 18 months ago, has had a positive effect, and he seems certainly to have a following that's impacted -- that's followed that and significantly impacted on the reduction of violence. But just based on what happened at Basra the other day, he clearly can have the opposite impact, as well.

So I think part of what is evident out of recent operations in Basra is there's been -- Prime Minister Maliki took steps to, I think, go after the militia and was seen to have -- was actually praised both in his country by both -- by all the different groups, and he's also received support externally in the region, which I think it's very positive.

So I think Sadr clearly is a very important and key player in all this. Exactly where he's headed and what impact he'll have long term I think is out there still to be determined.

Q Sir, if he returns to Iraq, would you --

Q Would the secretary address that too, please?

SEC. GATES: I would just say more broadly that I think those who are prepared to work within the political process in Iraq, and peacefully, are not enemies of the United States.

Q But if he were to return to Iraq, would you order him to be arrested, or do you feel that he's somebody who does want to enter the political zone and therefore you're trying to work with him?

SEC. GATES: I think I would be surprised if there were a move along those lines.

Q Which lines?

SEC. GATES: A move to arrest him. He is a significant political figure, and clearly, if he is willing to work within -- we want him to work within the political process in Iraq. He has a large following. And I think that it's important that he become a part of the process if he isn't already.

Yeah.

Q Yeah, Secretary --

Q To both of you, if your hope is not realized, if we're not able to see further withdrawals in the fall, what's the downside? What are we putting at risk if conditions force you to maintain force levels throughout the fall?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I think the available forces that we have in Iraq are the ones that offer -- should reductions continue -- potential to put forces in Afghanistan and also to build dwell time back here for our ground forces. And so there's risk associated very specifically with that. And that's probably in the three pieces that we try to pay a lot of attention to -- our force levels in Iraq, our requirements in Afghanistan which are unmet, as well as balancing the health of the force -- that if we stay at these levels for a significant period of time, which we can do -- I mean, we have the forces to do that, but we continue to press our forces at the levels we have and we would be unable to fill the requirements that we've got in Afghanistan.

Q Secretary, The Baltimore Sun reporting today that Marines sent to Afghanistan are essentially stuck on base, waiting for operations to be approved up the chain of command. Have you heard anything about this and can you talk about it?

SEC. GATES: This is the first I've heard of it. I don't really --

ADM. MULLEN: I saw the story this morning. I've actually been watching very carefully the 3,500 Marines getting to Afghanistan. They're a very important part of our efforts this year. I've watched their training to get ready for full operational capability and I've received no indication from the commanders out there that they're behind and that they're not going to be ready to go.

Q Mr. Secretary, Admiral Mullen, can you explain what the point is of the process which gives you -- both of you a separate voice to the president in the way forward in Iraq and talks about -- and you have the opportunity to talk about the stress on the force and the broader strategic risks, and at the end of that process, the president simply says General Petraeus will have all the time that he needs?

SEC. GATES: Well, I think -- first of all, I structured this process the same way I did last September. I wanted to make sure that the president had the opportunity to get the independent views of the field commander, the CENTCOM commander and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I wanted to make sure that it happened in a forum where they would feel comfortable speaking their minds and saying exactly what they thought. As it turns out, here in April, as in September, everybody ended up on the same page.

And I think that is that we are going to pay a lot of attention to General Petraeus' evaluation of the situation on the ground in terms of the pacing of the drawdowns. I think that that -- my own view is, that's what the president said. And it doesn't mean there aren't going to be evaluations and recommendations at various points, but there's going to be a lot of deference to his evaluation and his commanders evaluation of exactly what's happening in Iraq and whether this change in what he calls the battlefield geometry is working and whether the Iraqi security forces are stepping up and so on. So I think that's the context for all of this.

Q Just to follow up, Mr. Secretary, are you really on the same page? You used again this morning the word "pause," which the president has said is misleading and people shouldn't use.

SEC. GATES: Well, I got -- there was some confusion on the Senate side yesterday about this. When I say pause, I mean pause in the drawdowns. When the president used pause yesterday, he was very specifically referring to there will be no pause in our operations in Iraq. That's just the difference -- sort of get the Kremlinology of "happy" and "glad."

Q But the point -- he specifically said that that's not -- people have termed this period of consolidation and evaluation a pause and he said that's misleading. But you used it again this morning.

SEC. GATES: Well, I probably shouldn't have used it, because I meant an interruption in a process of withdrawal. Okay? of drawdowns...

Q So you're on the same --

SEC. GATES: Absolutely.

Q Same place on the same page?

SEC. GATES: Same line, same word.

ADM. MULLEN: The only thing I'd add to that is I feel very strongly that we are in the same place, and that we have the opportunity to assess the conditions on the ground and make a decision down the road as to where we should -- as to whether we should continue drawdowns or not. And General Petraeus has talked about that as a possibility as well. And to process what you asked about, in addition to General Petraeus presenting his views, the chiefs had an opportunity to do that, Admiral Fallon had an opportunity to do that and it is -- there are continuous opportunities to have, certainly from my perspective, discussions with not just Secretary Gates but the president on how we should move forward in this area and in others as well.

Q Mr. Secretary, we heard a lot over the last couple of days about Iran, particularly related to the operations in Basra, this perception that Iran was playing either a greater role or a perceived greater role in arming, training and, in some cases, directing militias there. Should we take away from this that there is an increase in Iranian activity there or that the U.S. was merely able to see what has been happening all along? And then, just quickly, for Admiral Mullen, your call for increased troops in Afghanistan, does that go to using U.S. troops to replace the 3,500 Marines when they leave?

SEC. GATES: I think that -- I honestly don't know the answer to your question, whether there has been an increase in Iranian support to these outlaw groups in the south or whether stirring the situation up has simply exposed more of what had been

there for a while but was not evident to us. And I -- the admiral may have a better feel for that than I do, but I think that there is some sense of an increased level of supply of weapons and support to these groups. But whether it's a dramatic increase over recent weeks, I just don't know.

ADM. MULLEN: I think I would agree that there is a sense that it has increased. Certainly this gave us much more insight into their involvement in many activities in that part. And that also is in the context of what we've discussed over many months about whether or not they were going to decrease their efforts. And that question has come up. Some indications, just by level of activity that they may have, as far as I'm concerned, this action in Basra was very convincing that indeed they haven't.

Q So what we were told a few months ago, that there was a decline at least in weapons that people were finding, turns out to be not true.

ADM. MULLEN: I haven't made the specific comparison. But certainly we never said, to the best of my recollection, we never said, yes, we're convinced that there really -- their behavior is much better. This Basra time convinced me that actually it isn't.

(Cross talk.)

Q Will you use U.S. troops to replace 3,500 Marines?

ADM. MULLEN: The president announced in Bucharest that we would add additional troops some time in '09. And that was based on the assumption that our troop levels would continue to come down in Iraq without any specifics.

There's a requirement that we have there. The first requirement is we need additional trainers there, about 3,000. Six (hundred) or 700 of those are being met this year by the Marines. They're not yet scheduled to be replaced, because we've made no decisions with respect to the trainers.

And then additional combat troops could also, would also be required, particularly in RC South, where the Marines are. But right now it's not a one-for-one replacement.

Q How long has this need for additional troops existed? Is this something new that the commander has suddenly said? Or have you been getting these calls all along?

SEC. GATES: Well, first of all, there's been -- I would put it in two categories and then ask the admiral to add.

There is the formal set of requirements through the NATO process, the CJSOR. And I don't know what it means -- (chuckles; laughter) -- but it is the formal requirements process of the troops and capabilities that the commander needs. That has included about

3,500 trainers, 3,200 to 3,500 trainers. It has included additional helicopter capabilities. It has included at least one or two additional maneuver battalions, as I recall.

What the commander out there has said outside of that, in effect, if he could have all that he thinks he needs that would be about three brigades. That is not part of the formal approved sort of NATO requirements at this point. That's more an expression of the commander's desire. Is that a --

ADM. MULLEN: Yes, sir.

Q And how long has he been -- (off mike)?

SEC. GATES: My recollection is, in terms of the three brigades, that that's been reasonably recently, a few weeks.

ADM. MULLEN: The official requirement request against the NATO document for the trainers has been out there for -- since sort of mid-last year. The additional two brigades is really -- at least, my take on that has been since sort of the fall time frame. In other words, last year was a pretty tough fighting year there, and General McNeill has come forward and said to move forward in that regard. Given what he saw last year, this is what he thinks it needs.

Q Mr. Secretary, yesterday in response to a question, you told Senator Levin that you no longer believe that the number of U.S. troops could be drawn down to about 100,000 in Iraq by the end of this year. Can you tell us why you've dialed back on that target? And do you have a new target in mind?

SEC. GATES: Well, first of all, I was asked to go back to make sure the record, like last year, was correct. What I was asked was did I think -- that I had said in December that I had hoped by the end of 2008 that we could be down to 10 brigade combat teams. And I was asked then yesterday, did I still hold that hope, and I answered no.

I think that the process has gone a little slower. I think that -- I actually came to that conclusion, I think, in my visit to Baghdad in February, when I spent quite a bit of time with General Petraeus, and he laid out his plans in terms of what he was going to do with the -- how he was going to adjust the forces for the -- after the withdrawal of the five brigade combat teams by the end of July, and his concern to proceed with drawdowns more cautiously. And he wanted a period -- he first of all wanted the period after the end of the drawdown of the five to what I characterized on the plane coming back from Baghdad as a period of -- a brief period of consolidation and evaluation to see what happens on the battlefield once you've got those five brigades gone. That gets you to the middle of September, and at that point it seems to me that trying to withdraw five brigade combat teams would be a real challenge and probably would be -- and he persuaded me that that probably would be too quick.

And beyond that, I think -- I'm not going to get drawn out on what I think now, because I think we're going to have to wait and see, and see whether the Iraqi security forces will have been able to take on new responsibilities, whether their new battalions are in the fight, whether the political process has continued. And I think it really is based on the situation on the ground. And I think we'll just have to take it a step at a time. And that's the way I characterized it in the opening remarks.

Q And do you believe the analysis of some military officials and some military experts who say that the U.S. military, the Army, just cannot sustain 15 combat brigades through the end of the year, and you'll have to get down to at least 13, maybe 12?

SEC. GATES: Well, I'll let the admiral respond to that.

ADM. MULLEN: Yeah, actually I don't believe that. I believe that we can sustain 15 brigades if that's, in fact, what the decision is.

Q Mr. Secretary, can you address this criticism that's been leveled by some that whether you're talking about reducing combat tours or whether you're talking about additional troop commitments for Afghanistan in 2009, that you're making commitments essentially that are going to have to be decisions, really, for the next president to decide whether he wants to follow through or --

SEC. GATES: Well, that was clearly an issue that came up before Bucharest, when we were talking about this. And it seems to me -- the two things led to my recommendation along those lines, to make that kind of commitment in principle -- the president was very careful not to say how many troops or when in 2009 they would be forthcoming -- but I made it on two grounds: First, I am confident that we will have a lower number of troops in 2009. Again, I'm not saying when in 2009, but I believe we will have a lower number of troops in Iraq in 2009.

Second, unlike Iraq, there truly is, I think, very broad bipartisan support for being successful in Afghanistan. We were attacked out of Afghanistan. People recognize the consequences of not being successful. And I believe very strongly that whoever is elected president is going to want to be successful in Afghanistan. And just as the French made an additional commitment, it seemed to me, in principle, that it would be important for the president to signal that the United States was going to stay in the fight in Afghanistan as well and do more, assuming we could.

Q Last year, you said you weren't willing to let NATO off the hook in terms of meeting additional commitments for Afghanistan. Yesterday before the Senate, you seemed to have thrown in the towel.

Have you given up on NATO?

SEC. GATES: (Laughs.)

Well, actually, you know, we have received some additional commitments at Bucharest. There are additional -- there are other countries that are thinking about increases.

Also, as I said at the hearing, one of the reasons why a year ago I began pressing for the NATO leaders to reaffirm the commitment to Afghanistan and have a strategic vision document they could sign on to that said, where will we be in Afghanistan in three to five years; why are we there, and what are the security risks to Europe of not being successful in Afghanistan?

While there may not have been as many troop commitments in Bucharest as some of us would have liked, I think the fact that knowing what they know now, compared to two years ago, all of the NATO leaders unanimously endorsed being in Afghanistan and winning in Afghanistan as a big deal.

And my hope is that they'll use that document with their own populations and help try and educate folks in Europe as to the direct security connection between what's going on in Afghanistan and in Europe. And I used this in the meetings in Bucharest and I used it in Munich.

And the fact is that virtually, that most of the terrorist attacks that have taken place in Europe, and many of those that have been thwarted, have either been either originated in Afghanistan or in the FATA, or they were trained there or they were inspired from there.

And so the Europeans need to understand there is a direct threat to their security. And my hope is that with this NATO-approved document in hand, that they can go out there and perhaps change some of the political dynamic in Europe and get a greater commitment of forces.

Q (Off mike) -- budgeting question. The cost of war has come up repeatedly this week.

What is the status of the remainder of the '09 supplemental? Back in February, when you --

SEC. GATES: The '08 supplemental.

Q Oh, the -- your '09 add-on -- you remember 70 billion (dollars) was the request in '09 and then --

SEC. GATES: I'm losing track. I've still got the '08 supplemental up there that --



Q I know. I can straighten you on that. But you were pressed, and you said the 170 billion (dollars), which is not going to be -- it's going to be inaccurate. You said that back in February.

But as you see the troop levels now stabilizing through the middle of this year and into '09, and -- is 170 billion (dollars) within the realm of potential?

SEC. GATES: We are still working our way through that. And I would expect that we would be in a position to report to the Congress within a matter of a few weeks on what that level -- what we more accurately estimate that level to be. And I'm -- we're just not there yet for me to be able to respond.

Q And that '08 -- you are waiting for the remaining 102 billion (dollars) to be passed?

SEC. GATES: Impatiently.

Q What happens -- and what are the ramifications if this drags through, you know, the end of May?

SEC. GATES: Well, end of May -- it would be "The Perils of Pauline," and we might escape the saw just at the last second. But the fact is -- we begin to run out of money to pay the Army in June. There are -- you had several other examples yesterday, as I recall.

ADM. MULLEN: Well, there -- I mean --

SEC. GATES: Where we've -- it would interrupt contracts at the depots for repairing our equipment. And so I mean, the implications are significant, and even the delay has consequences for BRAC and for the family housing, for procurement in a lot of different ways. So we really, really need that supplemental as quickly as possible.

Q Dr. Gates --

Q (Inaudible) -- both of you come back to the issue of Iran, because we've heard, again, so much about it by -- this week. By any measure, it appears their involvement in Iraq is not lessening but instead perhaps broadening and deepening.

So, when -- what's the end game in the minds for both of you? If the U.S., after all these months, hasn't been able to shut down the rat lines coming in, hasn't been able to stop the training and the increased accurate fire from Sadr City, if U.S. troops are now clearly continuing to be killed by Iranians -- and the president yesterday said that he would hold them to account, I believe -- what do you do? I mean, do you just keep on with the same strategy about dealing with the Iranian problem? Do you still hold to the position that Ahmadinejad couldn't possibly directly have any knowledge of all of this? What's the next step with the Iranians, and what do you do about stopping them?

SEC. GATES: Well, clearly we are going to be as aggressive as we possibly can be inside Iraq in trying to counter their efforts. I would say one of the salutary effects of what Prime Minister Maliki did in Basra is that I think the Iraqi government now has a clearer view of the malign impact of Iran's activities inside Iraq. And I think that -- I think there -- we -- they have had what I would call a growing understanding of that negative Iranian role, but I think what they encountered in Basra was a real eye-opener for them.

And so I think that -- I think that they are in a position themselves to bring some pressures to bear on Iran, it seems to me. And we hope that will happen at the same time that we and the Iraqi forces take all necessary steps we can to stop what the Iranians are doing inside Iraq.

Q Do you still both believe that Ahmedinejad has no direct -- I mean, I think it's been the administration's position -- you have no information, no indication that he would have any direct knowledge or role in this involvement inside Iraq?

SEC. GATES: I'll invite the admiral to comment. I haven't seen information to that effect, but I find it inconceivable that he does not know.

ADM. MULLEN: Nor have I seen any information to that effect.

Q Dr. Gates, if I could -- members of Congress this week expressed frustration about what they said were unrealistic goals in Iraq. And I wondered where does fostering democracy in Iraq stand as a goal? It seems like the military is already pushing stability and security far more than sort of democratic progress? What would say about that?

SEC. GATES: Well, in my original -- in my opening statement, I mentioned that one of the factors that General Petraeus will be taking into account in evaluating whether or not to have additional drawdowns this fall is whether he judges that they are necessary to provide security for the provincial elections. So I think that the role of democracy in Iraq remains an important part of our goal.

And frankly, I think there has been significant progress in terms of that regard, in terms of passing the provincial elections law -- or the provincial powers law, and planning for provincial elections this fall, a national election next year, the role of the Council of Representatives in passing legislation, the interaction between the legislative body, the Council of Representatives and the Presidency Council, the executive, if you will.

This looks to me, particularly for a country that has never experienced this kind of governance before, significant progress. So I think it remains a goal, and not just a goal, but one that is quite viable.

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